

**"Maybe he's thinking something on the inside
but is not showing it to us":**

**The Dynamics of Neighborhood Relations between Azerbaijani
and Armenian Communities in a Multiethnic Region in Georgia
after the Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020**

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Abstract

This paper explores the specifics of post-conflict neighborhood relations in the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities in Kvemo Kartli, one of the most ethnically mixed regions in Georgia. The diverse ethnic composition of the region and its historical and political background demonstrate that the non-homogenous, multiethnic local communities coexist, coping with post-conflict experiences. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2022, including interviews and field observations, this paper presents how the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh war influenced contemporary Azerbaijani-Armenian relations

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in Georgia. The results of author's research indicate that local communities developed contrasting approaches and strategies while still maintaining neighborly relations involving antagonistic tolerance. The article poses the question of whether relations in the community are based on the *komshuluk* system, or whether it is rather the case of antagonistic tolerance. It also reveals in what situations conflicts occur and in what situations good neighborly relations are nurtured. Therefore, the research results also fill a gap in the studies on interethnic relations in Georgia after the Nagorno-Karabakh war. This is also the first study that uses the aforementioned theoretical framework to analyze this particular area in Georgia.

Keywords: Georgia; Azerbaijani minority; Kvemo Kartli; Marneuli municipality; South Caucasus; Nagorno-Karabakh war; *komshuluk*; antagonistic tolerance

Introduction

In September 2020, my interlocutor Rima¹ – as she described herself, an Armenian by mother, Azerbaijani by father – said to me: “Now imagine a tank of water and fish swimming in it. What happens when someone shakes it? Well, silt rises up and contaminates it. And this is what is happening now between Azerbaijanis and Armenians.” We were sitting in the village of Shulaveri in the Kvemo Kartli region (south-east Georgia, about twenty kilometers from the border with Armenia and Azerbaijan) and talking about the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which had recently erupted three hundred kilometers away.

In order to explain what the conflict meant for the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia, it is necessary to go back thirty years, to the time of the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It broke out in 1988 and ended in 1994 with an agreement suspending the fighting and turning it into a frozen conflict (de Waal, 2003). Although Georgia did not participate in the war, members of its Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities were also affected, most often indirectly, as some of their relatives were involved. Moreover, guerrilla fighters from Armenia, referred to using the Arabic term *fedayeen*, were showing up in Georgian villages in Armenian-populated areas to gain support, which also posed the danger of conflict erupting between minorities. However, local residents often prevented it themselves, forming special groups to protect all villagers, regardless of ethnicity.² The Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Kvemo Kartli, despite the war, were able to coexist and cooperate by, among other things, engaging in trade, as Thomas de Waal (2003) pointed out during his research

1 In order to protect the anonymity of my research partners, all names have been changed; the names of the villages have also been changed where necessary.

2 During my fieldwork, I would often come across this information, provided by my interlocutors.

on the conflict in the early years after the signing of the agreement ending the fighting (cf. Allen et al., 2009; de Waal, 2003; Huseynova, 2009; Juvarly & Shabanov, 2004; Kusov et al., 2009; Lehti & Romashov, 2022; Mirimanova, 2006; Voronkov et al., 2016). On 27 September 2020 the second full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh started, which ended after forty-four days (Gamaghelyan & Rumyantsev, 2021; Pomieciński et al., 2022) with the ceasefire signed on 9 November the same year.³

The goal of this paper is to analyze the reaction and approach of the Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in Georgia – in places where they live close to each other – to the outbreak of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. What is particularly interesting for me is whether and how the situation effected or changed their mutual relationship. Given the state of the Azerbaijani-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh and the fact that, in Georgia, both minorities still live side by side, I would like to contribute to the literature on neighborliness (Lubańska, 2012) and antagonistic tolerance (Hayden et al., 2016) using the example of a case study from one of the multiethnic localities. To my knowledge, research that would use the concept of *komshuluk* has not been conducted in this region so far. My study examines relations between Azerbaijanis and Armenians still relatively soon after the beginning of the new Nagorno-Karabakh war. I look at the relations between these two groups in the borderland of Georgia and attempt to fill an existing gap in research on war and neighborliness relations by integrating peripheral voices in global academic discourse.

Materials and Methods

According to Wojciech Lipiński, in a situation of close proximity between two ethnic groups different strategies of coexistence are produced (Lipiński, 2012). He refers to the material collected by Cvetana Georgieva and Magdalena Lubańska, who describe a community-generated system of coexistence based on a dual code, in which, on the one hand, the importance of maintaining good neighborly relations is emphasized, but on the other hand, narratives of resentment with regard to difficult past events still seem to be strong (Georgieva, 1999; Lubańska, 2012; cf. Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2015). Both authors use the Turkish word *komshuluk* in their research in the Christian and Muslim communities conducted in Bulgaria. Literally, it means “neighborhood”, but Lubańska refines her own understanding of the term and translates it as *dobrosąsiedztwo* (Polish, literally “good-neighborhood”), meaning “neighborliness”, which is a special system of relations between neighbors who differ but live side

³ The prolonged blockade of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijan and the next phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which began in September 2023, have made it even more difficult to stabilize relations between Georgia's two largest national minorities. In addition to the casualties of the military operation, the Armenian population has almost completely left the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert (called Khankendi by Azerbaijanis) as a result of the war. In order to understand how the new situation in the region will affect the mutual relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia, research should continue in the future.

by side – it consists of the sum of all “neighborly practices” (for the concept of *komshuluk*, see Georgieva, 1999; Lubańska, 2012; Maciulewicz, 2023).

In my research, I look at the manifestations of interactions in given areas of neighborhood cultural life (Straczuk, 2006) as well as situations in which differences are marked or forgotten. As Marzena Maciulewicz states, neighborly practices can express themselves through various activities, such as greeting and helping each other, spending time together, inviting each other to celebrations, or asking a neighbor to look after the house. Participation in them may be based on principles of faith, personal issues, pragmatic approaches, or all of the foregoing (Maciulewicz, 2023, p. 105). We can relate this finding to the neighborly practices I observed among my interlocutors, ranging from daily to cyclical, performed during holidays or special celebrations. At the everyday level, Armenians are often invited to Azerbaijani houses for tea, and they are offered coffee when visiting Azerbaijanis. It also happens, of course, that on such occasions the choice of beverage which is served, coffee or tea, depends on the presumed preferences of a particular visitor. It is also a regular practice to share each other’s food during holidays.

Moreover, I also look at relations between residents from the perspective of a certain imposed tolerance, which stems from the inevitability of living together, thus resulting in efforts to keep decent relations and maintain contact despite mutual perception of otherness. This would be indicated by residents’ perceptions of the uniqueness of these behaviors, which they too see as a factor contributing to maintaining good relations between them. However, it should be noted that not every resident is affected by enforced tolerance in a similar way. Therefore, the perspective of Robert M. Hayden et al. was important to me since their study proposes the model of antagonistic tolerance, which applies to communities who define themselves primarily on religious grounds, and who live intermingled but usually discourage intermarriage (Hayden et al., 2016, p. 19).

Agnieszka Pasieka’s research in a religiously diverse village located in southern Poland presents another perception of neighborhood relations in a situation where religious, ethnic, or linguistic minorities dominate in a given area. Showing the complexity of minority relations in small communities, she concludes that a Catholic neighbor can be simultaneously perceived as a representative of the dominant group and a person sharing an experience of belonging to a marginalized group in the area (Pasieka, 2015). Similarly, in the context of my research, an Armenian neighbor is a Christian and thus, by definition, belongs to the dominant religion in Georgia, but at the same time, due to his or her different ethnic background, can be identified as a representative of a minority, sharing a similar status and sense of belonging, often based on the feeling of being neglected and discriminated against by the Georgian state (see e.g. Storm, 2019, p. 454).

Indeed, perceptions of common problems have a potential to unite Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as Sevil Huseynova states in her article on another ethnically mixed village in Georgia: Tsopi (Huseynova, 2009, p. 39; see also Koscińska, 2022). These include not only issues related to everyday challenges caused by unfamiliarity with the Georgian

language, but also those stemming from concerns about finding a job or issues of trust in the state as such, as well as those related to living in a locality far from urban centers, which struggles with problems of high costs of medical services, lack of water, electricity and gas bills, limited resources, or waste management. Sharing similar problems and the resulting need for mutual help triggers a sense of solidarity and irreplaceability. These challenges do not necessarily affect representatives of just one ethnicity.

The multiethnic composition of the region creates certain shared spaces with negotiated and sometimes impassable boundaries; it also has an impact on state institutions and official regulations concerning state borders. When the second Nagorno-Karabakh war erupted in 2020, what changed was not only narratives about the coexistence of different groups side by side. There were also restrictions on cross-border spatial mobility: any trips to Azerbaijan or Armenia became impossible for Georgian citizens (Koscińska, 2023). Georgia's border with Azerbaijan was closed due to pandemic restrictions, but – despite official information – its prolonged closure for more than three years began to be linked precisely to the war. Residents of the border region were aware that peace was still quite relative and a new attack could start at any time even though the agreement ending the fighting was signed the same year.⁴

The analysis is based on thirty semi-structured interviews and unanticipated conversations as well as participant and non-participant observation. My interlocutors, men and women between 20 and 75 years old, identify themselves either as Azerbaijani or Armenian. Considering that I talked with more Azerbaijanis than Armenians, observations among the Azerbaijani community prevail in my research material. Almost all of my interlocutors are Georgian citizens (except two persons, Azerbaijani citizens living in Georgia) and represent different occupations. My access to potential interlocutors was based on my previous contacts in the area. The field research was carried out between 2020 and 2022 in the Kvemo Kartli region (bordering Azerbaijan and Armenia), mainly in the Marneuli municipality, with two conversations held in the Dmanisi municipality.

The Area of the Study

The Kvemo Kartli region borders the Shida Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions of Georgia as well as two states – Armenia and Azerbaijan to the south and southeast respectively (see Fig. 1). It is divided into six municipalities: Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tsalka, and Tetritskaro. Azerbaijanis account for 41.75% of residents in the region (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2016, p. 22); the remaining groups include Armenians (5.07%), Georgians (51.25%), Greeks (0.62%), and Russians (0.49%). The region's capital

⁴ While conducting my research I often encountered the opinion that the Azerbaijani authorities were prolonging the closure because of the risk of ethnic Azerbaijanis, Georgian citizens, becoming involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

is Rustavi, and the town of Marneuli is the hub for Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Armenian communities in the Marneuli municipality. With their proportion reaching 83%, the municipality is considered the main Azerbaijani center in Georgia, but there are also Armenians, Georgians and a small number of other ethnic groups living in the area.

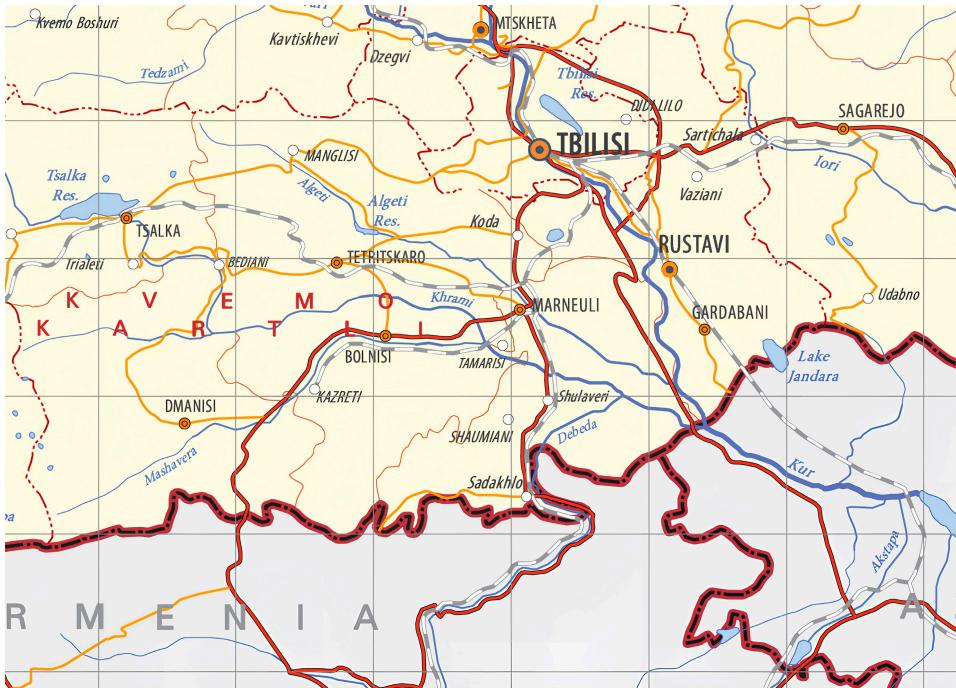


Fig. 1. Geographical area of the study (source: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies)

I decided to focus my research on Shulaveri and a few neighboring villages in the Marneuli municipality due to the fact that the area is inhabited by large numbers of both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, who live either in the same villages or close to each other. It was not without significance that relatively few ethnographic studies had been conducted there before, especially on Azerbaijani-Armenian relations (Romashov, 2022). Due to my previous activity in the area,⁵ I was often referred to as *müəllim*, meaning “teacher” in Azerbaijani, which indicated a certain status in the world of the studied community (Hastrup, 2008, pp. 143–144) and entailed trust. Although my research on the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh war began in 2020, I had the opportunity to build relationships with residents of this particular region before, in the course of research I conducted as part of my doctoral thesis, started in 2018 (Koscińska, 2023).

My stays in the field were defined by and filled with visits to neighbors and trips to relatives, shopping trips, walks, participation in weddings, religious and cultural events,

⁵ In summer 2018, I ran free English classes in a village near Shulaveri at the request of an Azerbaijani acquaintance.

celebrating birthdays, cooking and eating meals together, drinking tea, watching TV and all other forms of joint activities. This contributed to building relationships and allowed me to co-experience with my research partners (Bloch, 2021; Rakowski, 2018; Trzeszczynska, 2021) – as well as observe myself and my reactions – in routine, everyday activities and contexts. We shared happy events but also those that were sad. Apart from my physical presence in the field, I also participated in it remotely, maintaining contact via online means of communication, like WhatsApp and Messenger, and had the opportunity to watch it from the perspective of my interlocutors: they shared various types of video materials with me, showed photos and recordings that were important or were supposed to show me something important for them or support a given argument. As a result of remote participation, my presence in the field was a steady and continuous endeavor.

Shulaveri and its neighboring villages are located in the Marneuli municipality (Kvemo Kartli region), which, due to its proximity to the borders with Azerbaijan and Armenia, has long been inhabited by people declaring themselves to be of non-Georgian origin. From the early twentieth century until the collapse of the USSR it was an industrial center, and its factories, like a wool-spinning mill, attracted workers from other Soviet republics (Romashov et al., 2019). For this reason, conditions have developed whereby several minorities, not only Armenian and Azerbaijani, coexist. There are also inhabitants of Greek, Kurdish, Iranian, Ukrainian, and Georgian descent living there.

The collapse of the USSR brought freedom of religion for Muslims, Christians and other religious groups (Khavashi & Batiashvili, 2011). Consequently, there was a turn towards religiosity, which meant that a significant number of people returned to religious practices. My Armenian interlocutors are Christians and celebrate most religious occasions, while Azerbaijanis in Georgia belong to the Shia or Sunni branch of Islam. Both groups emphasize that there is no conflict between them. Although for Azerbaijanis Islam is one of the main factors of their distinctiveness from Georgians and Armenians and religion still plays an important role in their everyday life, some researchers notice that for some residents it is rather a way of thinking than a way of life (Prasad, 2012). Since the first years of independence, many religious centers, such as churches and mosques, have been rebuilt or restored.

Narratives about the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Inter-Ethnic Relations

During my research in Shulaveri in July 2020, the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan preceding the second Nagorno-Karabakh war had been going on for a few days. They might not have caused so much concern in Georgia if the area was not inhabited mostly by Azerbaijanis and Armenians living side by side. They share the same villages, workplaces, and educational institutions, like, for example, schools with Georgian and Russian as languages of instruction. In July 2020, during the first major intensification of

the clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh since 2016, which at the time had not yet turned into a war, I asked members of the two communities about their relationships with each other. In doing so with reference to ethnicity, I myself imposed divisions. Felix, a forty-or-so-year-old taxi driver, an Armenian who had lived in Georgia all his life, told me mockingly:

What kind of Armenian am I? I should be able to write and read Armenian, but I can't, I only speak Armenian. Yes, my parents thought they were Armenians, but I am more Azerbaijani than Armenian. I speak and work using Azerbaijani. (Felix, M44, Shulaveri, 2020, conversation in Russian)

In his words one can see a critical approach to the question of ethnicity and a rejection of his imposed affiliation (Anderson, 1983). His words may also indicate a rejection of ethnicity in the name of coexistence in neighborly relations as two groups with, perhaps, imposed ethnicities, but sharing a similar experience and having similar goals and values. However, when we talked later that year, in autumn 2020, when the war in Nagorno-Karabakh had been going on for several weeks, he no longer made such declarations. The ethnic divisions had started to become much more apparent than before and antagonistic tolerance began to be more marked. One day I went to the neighboring town together with Zehra, an Azerbaijani woman from whom I was renting a room. Our driver was the same Felix, her neighbor from a next village whom she treated like a son; he would always give her a lower fare. He said:

Actually, I interact mainly with Azerbaijanis; I work with them, I stand by the roadside all day waiting for passengers with them. What I see now hurts me; the conversations among people I work with, when I hear "Karabakh is ours, Azerbaijan's". I ask them, where we live here, whether it is not Georgia. What do they care about that land? They stop for a while, but after some time their conversations about politics continue. I don't like it. Maybe just a curfew in Georgia and increased control would reduce these propaganda activities. We don't need this war. Is it the sixteenth century that we cannot finally settle this problem with diplomacy? (Felix, M44, Shulaveri, 2020, conversation in Russian)

His approach can be read as a way to nurture good neighborly relations, whether consciously or not.

However, what has a great influence on the mutual perceptions of the two groups is television. It is important to note that access to Georgian TV in this area is very limited: reception is poor or unavailable. Perhaps this is one of the reasons behind the popularity of TV channels broadcast by neighboring republics in Azerbaijani, Armenian, or Russian. It is therefore fair to say that it is difficult not to be influenced by the war when, at home, one can hear Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev⁶ making statements about the fight to regain Nagorno-Karabakh on the daily TV news. Sometimes I would hear comments from my landlady's relative Aysel, pointing at the TV in the room, like: "How many young boys have already been killed. They say Armenians are worse than fascists", although she was

⁶ Ilham Aliyev (b. 1961) – Azerbaijani politician and president of Azerbaijan since 2003.

in close relations with Armenian neighbors on an everyday basis. But at the same time, during my research I could see attempts to justify the neighbors and see the ambivalence of the situation in which they found themselves. This could be seen, for instance, in her opinion about an Armenian neighbor whom she respected: "Maybe he's thinking something on the inside but is not showing it to us." More than twenty years ago, Thomas de Waal wrote about the lines of division in the region and I can relate his words to the situation of the community I observe: "Hateful impulses coexist with conciliatory feelings in the same person. Armenians and Azerbaijanis can be simultaneously enemies and friends. They are torn between aggression and conciliation, personal friendships, and the power of national myths" (de Waal, 2003, p. 273).

Fatima, another of my interlocutors, was a woman in her thirties who had spent some part of her life with her parents in Russia. Our conversations would often take place at her house: accompanied by her children, husband and friends, we talked while sipping tea. On one occasion, she started to daydream while we were watching a TV program showing destroyed mosques in Karabakh. She said: "Now that they have liberated Karabakh, we can go to Shusha together and take pictures. Lots of old, interesting stuff there." I thought she expected an immediate declaration from me, a declaration which would express my honest will to visit Karabakh with her soon. I would often remember the feeling of embarrassment her words caused in me back then.

After one of our conversations, I went to a neighbor's house and had a coffee brewed by his daughter. Felix expressed to me his concern about the war:

I don't know if you noticed, but that boy, you remember, we both saw yesterday, started playing war in the street a bit later. He and the other children were arguing over who would be the Azerbaijanis and who would be the Armenians that the others would run after. Nobody wanted to be Armenian. It's hard to watch. [...] Armenia will not give up, it will fight to the last soldier, nothing is decided yet. If it loses, it will ultimately be humiliated and that will send a message to the world that you can do whatever you want with it. [...] Shulaveri is the most beautiful place on earth. I know I don't live in my own country, but who cares. It doesn't bother me. I grew up here, this land fed me. You have to soak up life while you can. In the '90s they wanted to take me into the Bagramyan battalion, but I didn't want to fight against the Georgians in Abkhazia. I refused, they understood and let me go. Georgia is my country. Nations and history are harmful things, they serve to manipulate and do no good. And I know that it will only get worse. (Felix, M44, Shulaveri, 2020, conversation in Russian)

This indicates a process similar to what we can find in the theory proposed by Robert M. Hayden, who writes about patterns of coexistence and conflict among members of different religious groups, which he refers to as antagonistic tolerance (Hayden et al., 2016). While staying in Shulaveri and the surrounding villages, I often spent time with Fatima, her husband and his friends. As I already mentioned above, we would sometimes eat together and then have tea with roasted sunflower seeds. At the beginning of November 2020 I was invited to a birthday party of one of Fatima's husband's friends, an Azerbaijani man

who was turning thirty-one. The party was held in a local restaurant and apart from me all guests were Azerbaijanis. The date of his birthday suddenly turned out to be the day of the Azerbaijani army's victory: on 8 November the town of Shusha (called Shushi in Armenian) was captured, or, according to the Azerbaijani narration – liberated. Young men at the party raised a toast, rejoicing that "Shusha is like a gift for the birthday man". After that, we moved on to the dancing part of the evening: the guests began dancing the *lezginka*.⁷ It seemed that no one cared that Armenians lived nearby, and how such an open display of joy would affect local relations.

As I mentioned above, due to the language barrier and technical problems, many Azerbaijanis and Armenians watch Azerbaijani and Armenian TV. What also plays a role in intensifying the conflict between the two ethnicities is social media, providing further propaganda material that is sent between users. Sometimes discussions in Facebook comments enter the space of neighborly relations, and the accounts of Georgian Armenians and Azerbaijanis – who obviously have citizens of the two warring states among their friends – occasion conflicts. Forty-year-old Rima, when I talked with her in autumn 2020, seemed to be aware of this danger. She is an example of a person of mixed ancestry who made certain choices that were not accepted by all her relatives. When she was a teenager she decided to be baptized and later changed her surname to that of her mother of Armenian origin. However, considering the situation, even before the war, she stopped using her adopted name on social media accounts so as not to cause problems for her half-brother, an Azerbaijani living in Russia. She did not want his friends to see that he was in contact, even online, with someone of Armenian origin. Her father, also living in Russia, never understood her decision to change her religion and surname.

During our frequent conversations, Rima would show me videos from her friends sent via Messenger and WhatsApp displaying an Armenian perspective on the conflict. However, on a day-to-day basis she did not demonstrate her support for either side. She cared about good relations with her neighbors, important also because she and her mother run a small grocery store in the neighborhood. Her two daughters got names that give no suggestion of any ethnicity, which can be seen as taking care to maintain neighborly relations.

Relations based on neighborliness involve helping each other in various situations, inviting each other to religious festivals, offering festive dishes, or lending each other money. Armenians learn Azerbaijani through contact with its speakers (sometimes the latter also learn Armenian this way): they live in peaceful, multilingual coexistence, making transactions in shops or running small joint businesses. They also maintain the taboo against talking about topics that could affect their mutual relations. On the surface, the dynamics between members of the two ethnic groups appears to be under control. Only when a researcher stays in the community longer he or she can see under what conditions good neighborly relations are maintained and can notice existing resentments

⁷ *Lezginka* – a traditional Caucasian folk dance, very popular at weddings and birthday events.

and conflicts, which are intensified by the tensions of war. In the course of my fieldwork I often witnessed situations where opinions were openly voiced by Armenians, but also by Azerbaijanis, who were outraged at the breach of an unwritten agreement to maintain good neighborly relations. The voicing of opinions led to more resentment.

The sense of danger and insecurity associated with the war has also affected inter-ethnic relations, reinforcing the existing divisions. In conversations, this topic sometimes came up in passing. One example is a conversation about an Armenian girl living in the same village who was forbidden (by her grandmother and mother) to marry an Azerbaijani man. Aysel, already mentioned above, believed that such bans are understandable because, as she said, "What will happen if this girl's mother-in-law starts saying something unpleasant about Armenians – and the war is coming?" (Field Diary, Marneuli municipality, 21.12.2021). This comment indicates that residents of the area not only care about good neighborly relations, but also try to avoid situations in which these relations would be put to a great test. Rather than face the possible challenges of mixed marriages – they try to avoid them. Throughout the time of my research stay in July 2022, I observed the phenomenon of some Armenian women attending the mosque on holidays which are particularly important for the community. One of my interlocutors of Azerbaijani origin explained that the mosque is not necessarily treated only as a place of worship, but rather serves as a community building (he described it as a "social house"). I view this as another example of the *komshuluk* approach, stressing the ties within the local community despite the difference of religion.

One of my research stays in August 2022 coincided with *Meherrem* commemorations.⁸ As usual, I went with my landlady to do shopping. The taxi driver who took us to the main, trading road was her Armenian neighbor. First we drove to some shops at an intersection in Shulaveri. Throughout the entire stay, I had the impression – based on my observations until the end of the celebration time – that the whole village was listening to the *mersiye*⁹ prayers. I could hear characteristic tunes played on phones by children and adults. It was the same here, on the main road leading to Armenia and Azerbaijan: I could hear prayers and Azerbaijani music coming from the street. I spotted my friend Amira with another woman at a stall – they were preparing *halva* wrapped in *lavash*¹⁰ and distributing it with bottled water among people. We had a chat for a bit. I took a bite of the *halva* – it was fresh, warm, and delicious. Our Armenian driver ate some with us and said that it was the best anywhere.

Later on during the same fieldwork trip Azerbaijani women told me about an Armenian teenage girl whose mother did not want to let her go to the Shia march, called *Tasua*, in Marneuli, although she wanted very much to attend. When I visited her neighbor's house, I saw her sitting in silence, offended and sad. The girl was familiar to me, and almost every

⁸ *Meherrem* or *Muharram*, also known as *Meherremlik*, is the first month of the Islamic calendar, during which mourning ceremonies are held to commemorate the death of Prophet Husayn; they are practiced especially by followers of Shia Islam.

⁹ *Mersiye* – a poem written to commemorate the martyrdom of Prophet Husayn and his followers at Karbala.

¹⁰ *Lavash* – thin flatbread.

day during the *Meherrem* I would see her going to the village mosque for *merskiye*, where she would pray as Azerbaijanis do, striking her breast. In front of Aysel, her mother said that after all her daughter is not a Muslim to go to the mosque and march in Marneuli. Aysel then said ironically that it is as if going to the mosque makes one a Muslim. Similar words were directed by another Armenian neighbor at Aysel when the latter asked, passing by her house, if the children were going to the mosque in the evening. The neighbor got angry and said that they are Armenians, not Muslims. Aysel told me that the woman glared at her with anger, so she quickly walked away, but could not understand how she could say that, living among Muslims and still feeling bad among them. I believe that this is an example of how antagonistic tolerance can express itself in a crisis situation, when the domination of one group becomes too noticeable.

Effects of the Conflict on the Mutual Azerbaijani-Armenian Relations and Fears

David Leupold (2020) notes that being socialized in a post-Soviet environment of territorial conflict and gradual homogenization of societies on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, much of the younger generation views the past through the prism of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which continues to this day (p. 195). To some extent, it is possible to apply this statement to the situation of Azerbaijanis in Georgia, as well as to Armenians. Despite being Georgian citizens, many of them face actions in their community aimed at keeping the memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh war alive and justifying the actions of both sides.

During my research I also tried to talk to Azerbaijanis living in Georgia who fought in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Ali, a young soldier, had been serving in Azerbaijan since 2019 when the war broke out. Like his relatives, he lives in Georgia but is not a Georgian citizen: he holds an Azerbaijani passport. His service was extended to two years because he could not return due to the closure of the border with Georgia and the suspension of air traffic. His upbringing in a community characterized by ethnic diversity did not affect his (even if mostly declared) sense of connection with Azerbaijan and motivation to fight.

I wanted to stay in Azerbaijan and fight. I would go again if war broke out again and I got called up again. [...] Apart from me, there were about ten more people from Georgia with Azerbaijani citizenship whom I recognized. [...] When I returned from the war after one and half year, a *bayram*¹¹ was held at home. (Ali, M21, Marneuli municipality, August 2022, conversation in Azerbaijani)

When the young soldier finished his service, his victorious return home in 2021 was celebrated with great joy: there was a feast, *bayram*, with a sacrificial ram, dancing, and music. I also saw a video of overjoyed neighbors, several of whom I recognized. A grandfather of one of my

11 In Azerbaijani: a celebration; the word can also refer to a feast.

interlocutors – who, during an earlier conversation, was not too keen to share his knowledge of Nagorno-Karabakh and the soldiers with me – was also present. The soldier showed me a photo with a respected elderly man from the neighborhood accompanied by a representative of the Azerbaijani embassy in Georgia. He was awarded a diploma for merit.

Ali's mother was born in Azerbaijan and married in Georgia. Her husband, an Azerbaijani from Georgia, was a Georgian citizen. When he died, she decided to stay in the country but never applied for Georgian citizenship.

I want to get a Georgian passport for myself and my son, I'm afraid that he will be taken into the Azerbaijani army again. [...] I'm afraid of the revenge of the local Armenians, of them finding out where my son lives. (Sevda, W40–45, Marneuli municipality, August 2022, conversation in Azerbaijani and Russian)

The war has changed perceptions of one's place in Georgia and concerns about obligations to a state different and distant from where one lives. Questions began to arise about whether it made sense to hold an Azerbaijani passport and what costs were involved. While Azerbaijan has quite restrictive laws on citizenship, it is relatively easier to become a Georgian citizen. The soldier's mother was terrified that someone would come to their house and take her son back into the army, so she wanted to give up their Azerbaijani passports and apply for Georgian citizenship. At the same time she was convinced there was nothing to worry about because at least her son would be always respected in the community for having fought in Karabakh:

I'm happy because I know that, as a war hero, my son will not suffer deprivation and will be respected in the community. [...] Karabakh is the heart of Azerbaijan. (Sevda, W40–45, Marneuli municipality, August 2022, conversation in Azerbaijani and Russian)

During our two meetings, the soldier's mother was nervous, and this stress was also due to concern over relations with the local Armenians. Although she asked me not to mention to any Armenian where her son lived, I did not notice extreme secrecy (but at the same time I personally tried to keep as discreet as possible). The Armenians live nearby and they must have found out about the reasons for a loud feast on his return home. However, it is not talked about loudly, and the village is small and inhabited only by Shiite Azerbaijanis, although located on the main road to the border with Armenia. Everyone tries to keep the taboo. Still, the soldier's mother, despite the difficult memories, decided to show me her diploma and her son's war uniform; she was emotional about this.

Karen, a young man in his late twenties, grew up in the town of Marneuli in a house with Azerbaijani and Georgian neighbors next door. The neighbors share each other's food and offer each other treats: Azerbaijanis do it on Novruz, Armenians – on the feast of Surb Sarkis,¹² and Georgians – at Easter. The Azerbaijani neighbor always puts a table out

¹² The feast of Surb (Saint) Sarkis, the patron saint of love and youth, is celebrated 63 days before Easter in Armenia and places inhabited by Armenians.

in the yard, on which she places two "sets" – one with sweets for the Georgian house, and the other for the Armenian house. He described his relations with Azerbaijanis as follows:

As an Armenian who lived and lives with the Azeris during the war, I can say that it is very difficult to remain neutral for both sides. I heard a lot of bad things from my neighbors, from people I thought were my friends; from teachers in schools and from many other people. I watched happy people celebrating the victory over the Armenians, driving cars and shouting "Karabakh is Azerbaijan, next stop Yerevan". And it was not easy to see all this, to bear it all, to realize that my relatives had died there a few days ago. But these people were happy, they had won the war and were happy and that was normal. The worst thing was that Azerbaijani teachers were celebrating in schools with their students, and there were Armenian children in the classes too. It was horrible. And these teachers did it one by one. There were cases in Marneuli, in Shulaveri. And of course, after all this, I did not understand that all the speeches, all the meetings, all the festivals and all the European money was only spent just on blah blah blah. (Karen, M29, April 2022, online, conversation in English)

However, when we met a few months later, he told me that he had given a lift to some Azerbaijani-speaking young boys and he had a conversation with them in their language. Even when observing the current situation in the village, one could see that Azerbaijanis and Armenians still live in relative peace with each other, although they do not invite each other as guests so often as before the second war and do not participate in each other's festivities as they used to. However, they still spend time in front of their houses and talk like good neighbors usually do, nibbling on sunflower seeds or treating each other to roasted corn. They also buy goods from each other and lend each other money, which contributes to maintaining the relationships based on the intimacy of lived neighborship (Romashov, 2022, p. 26).¹³ The people of Shulaveri and neighboring villages know very well when, with whom and how to talk, including in what situations something should not be said. This is due to their immersion in a multiethnic neighborhood, in which good relations must constantly be nurtured (cf. Lubańska, 2012). They generate a sense of intimacy, but also mutual dependence.

Conclusions

The reaction of both minorities to the war represented a characteristic strategy of *komshuluk* and antagonistic tolerance. In this pattern, both minorities intentionally use ambiguous language to deal with sensitive issues on which there is strong disagreement between both sides, or to avoid engaging in discussion on difficult topics (Bryant, 2016; Cieślewska & Koscińska, in press). However, in this ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse community, conversations about conflict and difficult experiences often arise on the occasion of other topics. Sometimes they lead to outbursts of frustration, expressed

¹³ It is important to mention that there are no significant differences in social status or economic position that can possibly influence the contacts between those groups.

regardless of how such behavior will be perceived by a neighbor of a different ethnicity. For this reason, I can say that the material obtained during the research indicates the presence of two phenomena, that is, both *komshuluk* behavior and an approach based on antagonistic tolerance.

Members of the Azerbaijani minority constitute the vast majority in the area (more than 83% in the Marneuli municipality), and it is perhaps this numerical advantage, coupled with discrimination by the Georgian state and their sense of exclusion, that allows them to demonstrate their support for the war in Nagorno-Karabakh so openly. This is the case despite the fact that Azerbaijanis and Armenians interact even though the countries with which they share their respective ethnic or national affiliation have been at war with each other for more than thirty years. At the same time, Armenians in Marneuli are unable to express their support for Armenia in such a way: they share physical space with Azerbaijanis, who predominate in the region. They are also concerned about triggering an open conflict. Some of them support Armenia's defense of Nagorno-Karabakh territory, but the fact that they are publicly silent on the subject seems to guarantee relative calm in the region and the maintenance of neighborly relations. Indeed, after some time spent in the area of my research I began to notice that, no matter what, there is a neighborhood taboo whereby certain topics should not be discussed in public under any circumstances. Anyone who breaks this agreement is judged, and instances of such breaches are referred to as scandalous. There is a specific canon of behavior, since neighborliness, *komshuluk*, is a priority.

This article aimed to show how ordinary people representing different ethnic groups relate to each other in a region with a long history of coexistence, which is affected by ethnic conflict beyond the borders of the country where they live, sometimes also reinforcing established identity categories. However, as I mentioned above, interviews with Azerbaijani-speaking interlocutors prevail in my research material. Yet, the article is the result of relatively short-term research and I am convinced that addressing this topic requires further in-depth qualitative study.

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**"Może sobie coś myśli w środku, ale nam tego nie pokazuje":
dynamika stosunków sąsiedzkich między społecznościami
azerbejdżańską i ormiańską w wieloetnicznym regionie Gruzji
po wojnie o Górski Karabach w 2020 roku**

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł bada specyfikę stosunków sąsiedzkich po konflikcie w społecznościach azerbejdżańskiej i ormiańskiej w Kvemo Kartli, jednym z najbardziej zróżnicowanych etnicznie regionów Gruzji. Zróżnicowany skład etniczny oraz historyczne i polityczne uwarunkowania regionu pokazują, że niehomogeniczne, wieloetniczne społeczności mogą współistnieć, radząc sobie z doświadczeniami po konflikcie. Opierając się na badaniach etnograficznych, w tym wywiadach i obserwacjach terenowych przeprowadzonych w latach 2020–2022, autorka przedstawia, w jaki sposób wybuch wojny w Górkim Karabachu wpłynął na współczesne stosunki azerbejdżańsko-ormiańskie w Gruzji. Wyniki badań zwracają uwagę na to, że lokalne społeczności rozwinięły kontrastujące podejścia i strategie, jednocześnie utrzymując stosunki sąsiedzkie uzupełnione antagonistyczną tolerancją. Artykuł stawia pytanie o to, czy relacje w społeczności opierają się na systemie *komshuluk*, czy raczej jest to tolerancja antagonistyczna. Omawia też, w jakich sytuacjach dochodzi do konfliktów, a w jakich pielęgnowane są dobrosąsiedzkie relacje. W związku z tym wyniki badań autorki wypełniają również lukę w badaniach nad stosunkami międzyetnicznymi w Gruzji po wojnie w Górkim Karabachu. Są również pierwszymi, które wykorzystują wspomniane ramy teoretyczne do analizy tego konkretnego obszaru w Gruzji.

Słowa kluczowe: Gruzja; mniejszość azerbejdżańska; Kvemo Kartli; gmina Marneuli; Południowy Kaukaz; wojna w Górkim Karabachu; komshuluk; antagonistyczna tolerancja

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